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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION TOO CLOSE TO CALL

¶1. (SBU) With only nine days to go until the parliamentary elections, the race remains too close to call. Although the Democratic Party (DP) clearly has the advantage in terms of money and perception of strength, polls continue to show a near dead heat. A Zogby poll released on June 18 gives the DP a slim 2-point lead over the SP (with a three percent margin of error), but shows the larger DP and SP coalitions deadlocked at 42 percent each. The SP appears to have dropped (at least for now) talk of an election boycott or delay, after it finally became clear to the SP last week that there was no support among the international community for such radical measures. In an interim report released June 18, ODIHR said the electoral process was going generally smoothly, but cited cases of state pressure on government employees, a lack of transparency on the part of the Interior Ministry regarding ID card numbers, and delays in forming local electoral commissions. END SUMMARY

Race Coming Down to the Wire

¶2. (SBU) The June 18 Zogby poll confirms much of what Post has been hearing from contacts on all sides: the race remains too close to call. The poll shows the DP and SP coalitions deadlocked at 42 percent each. When respondents were asked to pick specific parties, the DP has a slight edge, 40-38. The poll shows a clear trend of gaining support for the DP) from 30 percent in January to 40 percent as of June 10, while SP support has remained steady since January between 36 and 39 percent.

¶3. (SBU) Contacts on all sides agree that the race is close. One DP candidate told PolOff that although the DP has more money and appears more organized, SP voters are more reliable, and tend to turn out early to vote. This DP candidate said that although the DP leadership is confident of victory, the DP is still haunted by memories of the 2007 Tirana mayoral race, where the DP considered the race to be "in the bag," only to lose by a healthy margin to Edi Rama. SP Tortoise vs DP Hare?

¶4. (SBU) The DP is clearly running the more visible campaign, blanketing Tirana and other towns with DP posters and ads. A senior SP strategist told PolOff that the SP is very short on money and is having trouble busing supporters to rallies or to apply for ID cards. Nevertheless, DP, SP and neutral observers agree that the SP maintains a large number of "silent supporters" that turn out reliably and in large numbers on election day. The SP senior strategist said he is confident the SP can pull out a slim victory, and

stated his belief that the DP can only win this election via fraud. (NOTE: It is clear that the SP has, at least for now, to have dropped all talk of an election delay or boycott after belatedly realizing that there was no support among the international community for such radical measures. When asked by PolOff if a boycott was still in the works, the SP official replied "No. We got your message." END NOTE)
Disunited We Stand?

¶5. (SBU) The Zogby poll also lends support to another truism of Albanian politics) a more unified right-wing tends to beat out a divided left. The poll (along with all others released this year) clearly show that were the SP to join forces with the Movement for Social Integration (LSI) they would almost certainly win the election. However, the leaders of the two parties, Edi Rama (SP) and Ilir Meta (LSI) remain bitter rivals, and much speculation in Tirana these days centers around the chances of a Meta-Rama deal prior to the elections, and what the terms of any such deal would be.
IDs) Another Race to the Finish

¶6. (SBU) June 18 was the last day to apply for ID cards. Starting June 19, ID centers will only distribute cards) applicants will now have to wait until after the election to apply. As of COB June 18:

- 1,402,361 had applied for cards
- 1,048,593 have cards in hand
- 353,768 cards remaining to be distributed

On June 18, 24,518 cards were picked up by voters. Eighty percent of respondents to the Zogby poll already have an ID card or passport. Ten percent said they had no passport, had

TIRANA 00000375 002 OF 002

applied for an ID card but had not yet received it, while 8 percent said they lacked a passport but would apply for an ID card. All in all, 98 percent of respondents have ID necessary to vote, had applied for such ID, or said they would apply. (NOTE: The Zogby poll was conducted May 23-June 10, meaning respondents still had between 8-26 days left to apply for IDs. END NOTE).

¶7. (SBU) ODIHR has seen no evidence of any widespread effort by any side to deny or delay the issuance of ID cards to voters. Nevertheless, ODIHR criticized the Ministry of Interior for a lack of transparency in releasing data on the number of passport-less voters who have applied or not applied for ID cards. According to ODIHR, the MoI will only fully release such information on June 22. There remains a good deal of uncertainty over just how many passport-less voters may be left. ODIHR said on June 19 that 505,000 passport-less voters had applied for ID cards. The Interior Ministry has not released its own figures on passport-less voters since May 26.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: All in all, ODIHR continues to be generally satisfied with the conduct of the elections so far, despite some isolated cases of violence (including the apparent car bombing death of a minor party official on June 18, shortly after Speaker of Parliament Jozefina Topalli had branded the party "mafiosi") and minor electoral infractions.

The composition of local electoral commissions remains a worry, as many of them are behind schedule. The race itself promises to be a close one. Although the counting of votes should be over on June 29, most observers expected a protracted round of electoral challenges from all sides) and particularly the smaller parties, which have complained bitterly since last year about the new electoral code.

WITHERS